

BOOK REVIEW

INTERVIEWS WITH NEVILLE ALEXANDER: THE POWER OF LANGUAGES AGAINST THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Brigitta Busch, Lucijan Busch & Karen Press (eds.)
Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014
pp 342. Softcover. ISBN 978-1-86914-277-3.

The story of Neville Alexander (1936–2012) has not been told adequately in post-apartheid South Africa. In this book Brigitta Busch tells one of his stories autobiographically, so to speak. The first half of the book, which concerns us as oral historians, is an edited version of interviews with Neville Alexander on his life, conducted over a period of five years, from 2006 to 2010. The focus is on his views on multilingualism, and the second part of the book contains some of his writings in this regards.

Without bitterness and in a non-accusatory way Alexander tells his story of radicalism. It is almost as if Nelson Mandela is talking, with whom Alexander shared prison time on Robben Island between 1964 and 1974, which is also the first ten years of Mandela's 18 years' imprisonment on the Island.

Alexander's grandfather was an Afrikaans-speaking Scotsman and his grandmother a freed slave from Ethiopia, eventually also Afrikaans-speaking. His mother was a primary school teacher and his father a carpenter and he was born in Cradock in the Eastern Cape in a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking environment. He wanted to become a teacher like his mother but because of his 'atheism' he recognised that this would be impossible. He studied at the University of Cape Town where he enhanced his English and German language abilities, after which he completed a Ph.D. in German at the University of Tübingen in Germany with an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation fellowship. At UCT he became politically radicalized, spent ten years at Robben Island where he expanded his speaking knowledge of Xhosa, and after apartheid participated in a variety of initiatives on language planning for the new South Africa. Especially fascinating to read is how Alexander and his co-inmates turned Robben Island into a school and a university where everybody had access to excellent learning.

The book is beautifully written, fascinating to read and very revealing in terms of Alexander's insights into the power of language(s) in an egalitarian society. It is a well-polished publication by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

The book is highly recommended for oral historians all over the world for the beauty of

its method, to libraries for its important contents, and to the casual and serious reader in history for an important and pleasing reading experience.

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